

The Development of the New Testament Canon

Abstract

This study examines the historical development of the New Testament canon, tracing God's providential work in preserving His written revelation. Beginning with Christ's promises to His apostles in John 14 and 16, the paper demonstrates how the early church recognized apostolic authority and inspiration as foundational criteria for canonical inclusion. The study explores multiple factors that shaped canon formation: the role of oral traditions in the post-apostolic era, the influence of spurious writings that forced discernment about genuine Scripture, technological advances like the codex that enabled the collection of multiple texts, external persecutions that compelled believers to identify truly sacred writings, and internal heresies that necessitated establishing boundaries around apostolic teaching. The paper concludes by highlighting Athanasius's 367 AD Easter letter, which listed the exact twenty-seven books comprising our New Testament, affirming that this process rested ultimately on God's sovereign guidance rather than human initiative.

Origins of the New Testament Canon

The Lord Jesus Christ, while carrying out his earthly ministry, spoke these words of promise to his faithful followers:

"All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you." (John 14:25–26 NIV)

At another time, speaking to these same disciples, the Savior said:

"But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you." (John 16:13–14)

A proper understanding of the New Testament Canon's historical development and origins must begin with the promises quoted above. Although often weak and sinful, the appointed apostles of Jesus Christ, through the power and help given them by the promised Spirit of Truth, were entrusted with the responsibility to communicate and testify, both orally and in written form, the words and work of the Son of God. To carry out this God-ordained task, the Spirit would "teach" and "remind" them of the life and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Additionally, this same Spirit of Truth would reveal things that were "yet to come."

The testimony of the apostles, provided directly by the Holy Counselor, was intended from the beginning to be authoritative. These words were given by God to the apostles and, therefore, were unquestionably the authoritative Word of God. The apostles were aware of the serious and important responsibility entrusted to them. That the Apostle Paul understood the significance and authority committed to him is clear from what he writes in his letter to the church at Corinth:

"If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command." (1 Corinthians 14:37)

The Apostle Paul's words to the churches were the "Lord's commands." They were to be received as if they were spoken directly by the Lord Jesus himself! This explains why the Apostle was eager to have his letters read in the various early churches. You can hear the urgency in his words as he writes to the ancient churches in Asia Minor at Colosse and Thessalonica:

"After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn, read the letter from Laodicea." (Colossians 4:16)

"I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers." (1 Thessalonians 5:27)

Finally, the Apostle Peter puts his stamp of approval on the writings of Paul by claiming that they are indeed “Scripture.” As such, they carry God-given authority. Peter writes:

“Bear in mind that our Lord’s patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.”
(2 Peter 3:15–16) [1]

The Scripture references cited clearly demonstrate that the apostles of Jesus Christ were endowed with the authority to speak and write in His name. In light of this commission, their teachings were to be accepted as if spoken directly by God. Additionally, these references confirm that the apostles were aware that this authority was given to them through divine inspiration. In obedience to their calling, they began to witness both through spoken words and written texts. This study will argue that church leaders who succeeded the appointed apostles acknowledged this God-given authority and inspiration. Consequently, they sought to preserve their writings at all costs. This ultimately led to the creation of the New Testament Canon. It is this authority and inspiration, this “God-breathed” quality, that served as the fundamental criterion used by the early church to establish the Canon.

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16)

The great task for the early church, then, was to prayerfully recognize what was “God-breathed” and what was not.

The objective of our study is to highlight God’s wonderful work in the development of the New Testament canon. Understanding the canon’s development matters deeply for contemporary believers because it demonstrates God’s faithfulness in preserving His revelation and strengthens

our confidence that the Scriptures we hold today are indeed those He intended for His church. Providence has rightly been called a great mystery, but as a man looks back with an eye of faith to the historical record, he must marvel at the work of God in preserving His holy word. This study will seek to present the variety of means God used, in His infinite wisdom, to stir up His people to the vital task of assembling His written revelation. We begin our study after the apostles' deaths and will conclude when there was general agreement in orthodox Christendom about which written documents belonged to the collection we now call the New Testament. It is a study that speaks volumes about the faithfulness of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love the redeemed in Christ have for the Word of God, and the sovereign preserving hand of an Almighty God!

Early Post-Apostolic Era

Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, many factors contributed to the long but deliberate process of adding a second canon. Early Christians, in the first two centuries, recognized that Old Testament scriptures, frequently quoted by Jesus and his apostles, were the authoritative word of God. The existence of an already established body of inspired writings in the Old Testament likely served as a model for an additional “new” collection of inspired texts. This understanding was likely reinforced in their minds after the Jewish Council of Jamnia around 90 AD. Though the Old Testament canon had been essentially settled centuries earlier, this council provided formal recognition that may have prompted Christians, many of whom had Jewish origins, to consider a similar process for their own growing body of sacred texts. In the near future, a concentrated effort will begin to create concise lists that will eventually form another final set of inspired writings.

Early Writings: Authority and Inspiration Recognized

The historical record is abundant with accounts showing the early church's recognition of authoritative and inspired writings. Church leaders were careful to acknowledge that the sayings of the Lord and the writings of his apostles were authoritative in and of themselves, aside from the pronouncements of men. Early writers acknowledged that Jesus had supreme authority and that the apostles had parity with the Old Testament prophets. Time after time, the early writers would quote Old Testament passages and then often, in the next sentence, quote a word from the Gospel or some other work destined to be part of the New Testament canon. F. F. Bruce directs his readers to the writings of Clement of Rome, who believed that the words of the Lord Jesus were as authoritative as those of the Old Testament. This equality between the words of the Savior and the Old Testament prophets is demonstrated below:

Clement of Rome, in his letter to the Corinthian church (AD 96), quotes the words of Jesus as being at least on a level of authority with those of the prophets. "The Holy Spirit says," he states, introducing a conflated quotation from Jeremiah 9:23f. and 1 Samuel 2:10 ("Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom nor the strong man in his strength nor the rich man in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in the Lord, to seek him out and to practice judgment and righteousness"), and then he goes on: "especially remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, 'Be merciful, so that you may obtain mercy...' (with further quotations from the Sermon on the Mount).[2]

Another example is found in the writings of Theophilus, the well-known Bishop of Antioch from the late second century. This bishop was known for his deep respect for the Old Testament scriptures. In fact, Theophilus claimed that his conversion to Christ occurred through reading the Old Testament prophets. Metzger highlights Theophilus's high regard for the gospels and the writings of the Old Testament prophets. Once again, we see this parallel between the prophets of old and those of the new. Speaking of Theophilus, Metzger notes:

Once he quotes a statement that comes from Luke (18:27). To him, the Evangelists were not less inspired by the Holy Spirit than the prophets of the Old Testament: "Confirmatory utterances are found both with the prophets and in the gospels." The Gospel, according to Matthew, is to

him the “holy word.” Theophilus explicitly mentions John by name as one of “those who were spirit-bearing...” [3]

Many more examples could be given to demonstrate how the early church believed God provided written revelation through the Holy Spirit’s guidance. This acknowledgment of authority and inspiration was essential to the formation of the New Testament canon.

Role of Oral Traditions

When the apostles left this world, faithful believers were instructed to remain true to the apostolic witness. Some evidence indicates that during the late first and early second centuries, Christians were content to pass down the teachings of the Lord and His apostles orally. The historical record shows that as long as eyewitnesses who knew the apostles and could share their teachings were available, the urgency of acquiring or copying written materials was not the primary concern. This situation would soon change, but initially, the emphasis may have been on those who knew an apostle directly and could receive their teachings firsthand. An often-cited example in early Church history is the account of Papias, the bishop of Hierapolis, in AD 125. Papias wrote:

If ever anyone came who had been a follower of the elders, I inquired into the words of the elders, what Andrew or Peter or Philip or Thomas or James or John or Matthew or any other of the Lord’s disciples were saying. I did not think that information from books would help me so much as the utterances of a living and surviving voice.[4]

Gamble, commenting on this period and in conjunction with Papias's words, writes:

So, although Papias knew written gospels, he did not defer to them but preferred oral tradition. This oral tradition was too well-established to be completely displaced by written materials, and it continued to maintain considerable authority alongside the written gospels well into the second century.[5]

One practical factor to consider when preferring oral tradition was the limited number of existing copies of the four gospels and other apostolic writings. This limitation likely meant that the Word of God spread more quickly by word of mouth than through written formats, as creating written versions was a slow and labor-intensive process.

Role of “Spurious Books”

The well-known early church historian Eusebius of Caesarea categorized early church writings into four useful classes.[6] The first class was the “recognized” class of books. This category included material that, without question, was acknowledged by the early church as the inspired Word of God. The second class was known as the “disputed” class. These books, such as Hebrews, James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, were sometimes seen as questionable regarding their inspiration by God. The third class was called “spurious” books. Although they were NOT ultimately considered part of the Word of God, these books had some devotional usefulness in the church. The final class, “heretical,” consisted of those writings recognized as dangerous due to the false teachings they contained. It is the third class, or “spurious books,” that we focus on in the development of the New Testament Canon. These books, often passionate in devotion to Christ and filled with exhortations to Christian living, played a significant role in the early church and in canon development. Books such as the allegorical Shepherd of Hermas, the Didache, and the Epistle of Barnabas were frequently used even during early church worship services. These are just a few of the writings that were replete with references to passages in the Old Testament and to the sayings of the Lord Jesus Christ and his apostles. One example is the early church manual for order and Christian living called the Didache, or “teaching.” Metzger, commenting on the Didache, writes:

Apart from such explicit quotations, the Didache also contains three separate references to what the Lord commanded in the Gospel and echoes from several other New Testament books. An analysis of these reminiscences shows that the Gospel, according to Matthew, was the chief source for the author’s knowledge of the teaching of Jesus, but alongside this written gospel, he was also familiar with phrases from oral tradition.[7]

Now, an important question the early church faced was whether these “spurious” books should be considered equal in authority to the apostles’ writings. How should they determine what was and was not inspired?

During the first few centuries, it was not uncommon for some of these spurious books to make their way onto the lists of men who considered them the Word of God. For example, we know that Irenaeus, Bishop in Gaul and disciple of the famous martyr Polycarp, kept a list that included the “Shepherd of Hermas.” This list also included the gospels and Paul’s letters. Origen, a teacher in Alexandria, Egypt, in the early third century, had a list that included the Didache.

In various locations, some church leaders mistakenly considered one “spurious” work, the “Epistle of Barnabas,” on par with Scripture. Souter comments on this letter:

The Epistle of Barnabas had something like a canonical position in Egypt. In his Hypotyposes, or commentary on the Catholic Epistles, of which only fragments have survived, Clement of Alexandria commented on it. Origen calls it “catholic,” a term which he elsewhere applies to 1 Peter and 1 John and which, for practical purposes, may be identified with “canonical.” [8]

This epistle was later rejected as non-canonical, but it is essential to recognize that a process was undertaken before these books were determined not to be “God-breathed.”

These spurious books played a very important role in the early church because they forced a decision about what truly came from the Holy Spirit. Many men claimed to have the inspired Word of God, and various lists were being created. In God’s divine plan, the early Christian church was compelled to make crucial choices about what constituted God’s true revelation. It was necessary to distinguish the authoritative Word from these other writings. Additionally, events like persecution and false teachings also pushed the church to recognize Scripture.

Role of Technological Advancements

In God's wise providence and timing, at the end of the first century and the beginning of the second, Christians began adopting a new way to collect writings into a single document. This was possible thanks to significant advances in bookmaking technology. This innovation, known as the codex, gradually replaced the common scroll. Unlike scrolls, which were large, bulky, and had limited writing on one side, the codex offered a leaf-style book format that allowed writing on both sides of the material. This invention made it much easier to handle and store written materials. Metzger notes the following:

As long as Christians used the roll to transmit their sacred books, the four Gospels or the Pauline Epistles could be collected only by assembling several rolls in the same box or chest. When, however, the codex form of the book was adopted, several or even all of the separate documents of what came to be called the New Testament could be physically assembled in one volume. [9]

This practical innovation significantly accelerated the collection of written documents, including the four gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, and various letters. Of course, this invention did not determine which books were ultimately included in the New Testament canon, but it greatly improved the ability to gather the recognized Word of God into a single source.

The invention of the codex also played a significant role in bringing together multiple inspired books into a single collection. Thus, by the early second century, the four gospels and the epistles of the Apostle Paul were often found grouped together. This greatly helped the early church in its effort to understand the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ and His apostles. F. F. Bruce writes:

What is important is this: from the early second century onward, Paul's letters circulated singly and as a collection. It was as a collection that Christians of the second century and later knew them, both orthodox and heterodox. The codex into which the letters were copied by their first editor constituted a master copy on which all subsequent copies of the letters were based. [10]

It is a fascinating side note that throughout history, men's technical advancements often led to the broader spread of the Word of God. One can also highlight the invention of the great printing press in the 15th century. Under God's good providence, this invention multiplied the written Word of God many times over, especially under leaders like William Tyndale. How gracious the sovereign God has been to use human inventions to bring His eternal truth into the hands of mankind! Of course, in our own age, the creation and deployment of the internet have advanced the spread of God's Word throughout the world!

Trials Without

The Christian apologist Tertullian, writing sometime in the late second century, made the famous observation that "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." While it may not have been his main intention, Tertullian's words are relevant to the development of the New Testament Canon. We learn early in the biblical story that persecutions, although carried out by sinful people, can and are used by God for His eternal purposes. Like Joseph of old, who was persecuted by his brothers and sold into Egyptian slavery, the events of his life ultimately served the glory of the Sovereign Lord. After their father's death, Joseph speaks to his brothers, reflecting with a perspective of faith, and says:

"Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." (Genesis 50:19–20)

Joseph, having faced many trials and overcome them through God's grace, understood that his past experiences of evil had a clear meaning and purpose. He later saw that the sovereign God was guiding his affairs.

The early church was no stranger to persecution. We learn from Luke that this persecution was also a significant means under God to spread the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. After the stoning death of the deacon Stephen, Luke writes:

“On that day, a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.” (Acts 8:1)

Speaking of this advancement of the gospel as a direct result of persecution, F. F. Bruce writes in his commentary on the Book of Acts:

The persecution and dispersion, however, brought about a beginning of the fulfillment of our Lord’s commission to His disciples in Chapter 1:8: “ye shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and all Judaea and Samaria...” [11]

The trials the early church faced led to the growth of Christ’s redeeming work. What was true about spreading the gospel because of the disciples’ displacement in the first century was also true in post-apostolic times for forming the New Testament canon. The fires of persecution posed important choices for the early church. Confronted with punishment or even death, only the true Word of God could give them the hope and encouragement they needed!

The Role of Persecution and the Scriptures

In the first few centuries after Christ, the early church faced periods of persecution. Early on, as described in the Book of Acts, Jewish authorities were the main source of persecution. Acts 12 shows that King Herod ordered the death of James, the brother of John, by the sword. This pleased the Jewish leaders. Many more persecutions followed. Most historians date the period of Jewish persecution from 33 AD to 64 AD. After the Jewish persecutions, the Roman Empire, the governing authorities of the time, began their own campaign of persecution. These dates are generally seen as starting under Nero in 64 AD and ending with Emperor Constantine’s reign in the early 4th century. Throughout these centuries, persecution sometimes occurred locally, and at other times it was widespread across the entire empire.

During a particularly brutal reign, Christians faced crucial choices that ultimately shaped what was recognized as the authoritative Word of God. During the reign of Roman Emperor

Diocletian, a severe persecution of Christians erupted. Diocletian issued four major edicts. The first, which we focus on in relation to our study, was issued in February 303 AD. It required authorities to destroy all Christian places of worship and to eliminate all “sacred” books.

Some may ask what this has to do with the development of the New Testament. The simple answer is that when faced with surrendering the precious Word of God, believers had to decide what they were willing to give up. For example, if someone had a copy of the four Gospels and a copy of the Epistle of Barnabas, which was valued more? They could satisfy the authorities by surrendering one book and hiding another. This is often what took place during this great period of persecution. W. H. C. Frend makes a very interesting statement. He writes:

On February 23, 303 AD, Diocletian ordered the newly built church at Nicomedia to be razed. He demanded that its scriptures be burned and seized its precious stores for the treasury. Diocletian’s first “Edict against the Christians” was published the next day. The edict ordered the destruction of Christian scriptures and places of worship across the Empire and prohibited Christians from assembling for worship.[12]

During the Diocletian persecution, Mensurius, the bishop of Carthage, hid his copies of Scriptures in a safe place, and in their stead handed over to the waiting magistrate’s writings of “the new heretics.”[13]

In another instance of severe persecution, Metzger recounts three women who refused to surrender their scriptures at the cost of their lives.

In other instances, stiffer resistance is offered when believers were asked to give up their Christian books. In the account of the martyrdom of Agape, Irene and Chione, at successive hearings, the three women were interrogated by the prefect Dulcitius of Thessalonica, who inquired, “Do you have in your possession any writings, parchments, or books of the impious Christians?” Chione replied, “We do not, Sir. Our present emperors have taken these from us.” On the next day, when Irene was brought before the court again, the prefect asked, “Who was it

that advised you to retain these parchments and writings up to the present time?” “It was almighty God,” Irene replied, “who bade us love him unto death. For this reason, we did not dare to be traitors, but we chose to be burned alive or suffer anything else that might happen to us rather than betray them” (i.e., the writings). After sentencing the young woman to be placed naked in the public brothel, the prefect gave orders that the writings in the cabinets and chest belonging to her were to be burned publicly. The account concludes by describing how, in March and April of the year 304, the three became martyrs for their faith by being burned at the stake.[14]

These trials, bravely endured by many believers in Christ, played a vital role in gradually establishing what should be recognized as God’s eternal truth. Numerous examples could be mentioned. How valuable is the Word of God to those who love their Savior! May it be so for both the author of this paper and all who read it!

Trials Within

The Role of False Teaching and the Scriptures

In an earlier section, this study highlighted the role of so-called “spurious” books in shaping the New Testament canon. Similarly, false teachings, often documented in books and articles, influenced which writings were included in the canon. One notable heresy that spread rapidly in the early church was Montanism. This heresy was based on false teachings about the Holy Spirit and His work in the world. It claimed that the gifts of inspiration and prophecy continued beyond the apostolic era. Montanism gained popularity in the middle of the second century. Various writings indicate that Montanus, the founder, and his followers documented these teachings and collected them alongside the words of Jesus and the Old Testament prophets. These writings ultimately stood in sharp contrast to the authoritative, true revelation of God. Regarding Montanus’s view on continued inspiration, Metzger writes:

The insistence on the continuous gift of inspiration and prophecy influenced the Church to emphasize the final authority of apostolic writings as the rule of faith. By rejecting the

extravagances of Montanism, the Church took the first step toward the adoption of a closed canon of Scripture.[15]

It is important to highlight the early start of this movement. The work of carefully choosing what should and shouldn't be part of God's collected revelation was already underway!

Conclusion

Many volumes of books have been published on the important subject of the historical development of the New Testament Canon. This paper has intentionally limited the scope of this subject to highlight the various means, under God's good providence, used in establishing the New Testament Canon. It is not an exhaustive or comprehensive list. We have seen that the church was very early in identifying the components that made up the true Word of God. We have seen that early lists were created that closely matched the final list that comprised the canon.

Throughout this study, we have observed how God employed multiple converging factors to accomplish His sovereign purposes in preserving His Word. The apostles' testimony, confirmed by the Holy Spirit, laid the foundation for divine authority. The careful discernment of early church leaders as they distinguished genuine apostolic writings from spurious works demonstrated the Spirit's guidance in protecting doctrinal purity. The codex's technological advancement provided a practical means to collect sacred texts into unified volumes. The fires of persecution forced believers to identify which writings they valued above life itself. The challenge of false teachings such as Montanism compelled the church to clearly define the boundaries of inspired Scripture.

These various streams flowed together under divine providence to produce the New Testament we possess today. In the annual Easter letter of 367 AD, the great champion of Nicene Orthodoxy, Athanasius, listed the exact twenty-seven books that now make up our New Testament! The process by which this was achieved was never in doubt, as it depended not on the will or power of man but on the will and power of God, the Holy Spirit. What appeared to

human eyes as a gradual historical process was, in the eye of faith, the unfolding of God's eternal plan to preserve His revelation for His church throughout all generations.

“For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” (2 Peter 1:21)

All praise and thanks to our great God and King for His Holy Word!

Endnotes

[1] Wayne Grudem, in his *Systematic Theology*, notes that the word Peter used for “Scriptures” appears fifty-one times in the New Testament and refers to the Old Testament Scriptures in every instance. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 61.

[2] F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1988), 121.

[3] Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 118.

[4] Metzger, *The Canon*, 52. Quoting Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* III.xxxix.4. There is some debate about the term “books.” It is unknown whether the bishop referred to recent written materials or to Old Testament books.

[5] Harry Y. Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 26.

[6] Material taken from “The Development of the Canon of the New Testament,” online at <http://www.ntcanon.org/Eusebius.shtml>

[7] Metzger, *The Canon*, 50.

[8] Alexander Souter, *The Text and Canon of the New Testament* (New York: Scribner, 1917), 179.

[9] Metzger, *The Canon*, 109.

[10] Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 130.

[11] F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, reprint 1983), 175.

[12] Material taken from Wikipedia, “Diocletian,” online at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diocletian>

[13] W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, reprint 1981), 372.

[14] Metzger, *The Canon*, 108.

[15] Metzger, *The Canon*, 106.

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